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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 22 of General Assembly resolution 53/203 A of 18 December 1998, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-third session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of the Secretary-General's report of 31 March 1999 (A/53/889-S/1999/362), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Political developments

2. My last report described the two rounds of intra-Afghan talks held in Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, which concluded on 15 March with a statement issued by the two parties, indicating that they would meet again, preferably inside Afghanistan, after the religious holiday of Eid-Al-Fitr. Shortly after the talks concluded, the two sides lapsed into mutual public recriminations, which cast doubt on whether talks would resume at all. On 10 April, the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, issued a statement indicating that the Taliban were not willing to continue talks with the opposition.

3. There has been no change in the Taliban decision since then despite the United Nations's efforts to persuade them otherwise (see paras. 11-14 below). The Taliban viewpoint is that the talks can only be resumed if the opposition accepts the Emirate system. The Taliban would be prepared to share Government

with the other side in the event that the latter join the Emirate. Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud and his spokesmen have repeated that they cannot accept the Emirate system since the Taliban have no popular or legal mandate to govern or to dictate terms.

4. The talks have thus stalled. Mutual confidence has eroded and meaningful contact between the two sides at a senior level is negligible. The two sides have chosen to revert to fighting to settle their differences. The escalation and spread of the fighting is detailed in the paragraphs 8 to 10 below.

5. There is widespread disappointment over the breakdown in the talks, expressed by both the international community at large and by most key neutral Afghan political groups. Both I and my Special Envoy have expressed the United Nations deep regrets over the Taliban's decision not to return to the negotiating table. The President of the Security Council, in a statement to the press on 19 April, urged the two sides to resume talks. Russia and Pakistan also released a joint statement along the same lines during the visit of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Nawaz Sharif, to Moscow. The United States Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs has urged Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran to use their influence to persuade the warring factions to restart the talks. Many neutral Afghan personalities have also supported the resumption of dialogue.

6. On 29 April, the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, announced an initiative whereby a group of 30 Afghan political figures would meet in Rome to prepare for the convening of a Loya Jirgah (Grand Assembly). The Taliban have publicly rejected this initiative, stating that the former King had lost the people's trust. The United Front (UF) welcomed the idea of the Loya Jirgah and awaited more detail. A broad range of Afghan groups as well as certain Member States, including the United States of America, have welcomed Zahir Shah's initiative.

7. China and Japan were among a few countries which have recently sent delegations of diplomats to Kabul and other places in Afghanistan. Pakistan, Turkmenistan and the Taliban signed a tripartite declaration of intent on 30 April to construct a gas pipeline traversing Afghanistan on a north-south axis. The Uzbek Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abdulaziz Kamilov, visited Islamabad and Kandahar from 31 May to 2 June. A Taliban delegation led by the Minister of Mines visited Switzerland on official invitation at the end of May.

B. Military situation

8. The period under review has seen a marked deterioration in the military situation. The military posture of both belligerents has hardened. The UF military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, met the Russian Minister of Defense in early April. On 11 April, the day after the Taliban's decision not to resume the peace talks, the UF fired three rockets into the suburbs of Kabul. This shelling of Kabul continued sporadically throughout the reporting period, culminating in over 40 rockets being fired during May, with 20 fired on 20 May alone, resulting in 2 civilian casualties.

9. The fighting intensified in the northern and central areas. On 16 April, heavy fighting broke out around Khenjan, north of the strategic Salang tunnel in Baghlan province, as well as in various localities of Faryab province in the north-west. Small scale guerilla activity also occurred in the eastern provinces of Laghman and Kunar. On 21 April, anti-Taliban forces, comprising elements from the Hezb-e-Wahdat and Harakat-e-Islami, seized the city of Bamyan in central Afghanistan from the Taliban. On 28 April, the Taliban launched a counter attack on Bamyan and conducted bombing missions on UF-held towns such as Taloqan, Dara-e-Suf and Jebel-u-Seraj. On 2 May, more heavy fighting took place on the front lines north of Kabul as well as around Khanabad in Kunduz province. On 9 May, the Taliban succeeded in recapturing Bamyan and proceeded further to take Yakolang, the second largest town in Bamyan province, on 14 May.

10. On 19 May, the Taliban reported an attempted uprising in the western province of Herat by Afghan dissidents, who, the militia alleged, had been supported by a neighbouring country, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran categorically denied the involvement in the event. Over 100 arrests were made by the Taliban and some eight people were executed. The UF claimed that over 50 people were executed. The Harakat-e-Islami, an opposition Shia party, accused the Taliban of conducting a systematic purge of Shia in Herat.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE MISSION

11. Since the conclusion of the second round of intra-Afghan talks in Ashkabad on 15 March, the Mission has spared no effort to try to persuade the two sides to resume their talks in accordance with the Ashkabad declaration. To this end, UNSMA has held a series of face-to-face meetings with senior advisers from both sides. The Mission has urged that if the two sides feel unable to resume the talks at a high level and in the same format, then consideration should at least be given to some form of direct contact.

12. To create a more conducive atmosphere for talks to resume, the Mission has encouraged both sides to consider and agree upon mutual confidence-building measures. The Security Council, in a statement to the press on 19 April, asked the Mission to pursue confidence-building measures with the two belligerents.

13. The Mission has promoted three types of confidence-building measures: military, political and humanitarian. The proposals for military measures have included the appointment by the two sides of military liaison officers and the formation of a joint conflict control centre. Political measures involve finding out whether there is scope for joint statements by the two sides on such issues as military truces or ceasefires to allow the polio immunization campaign to proceed. Humanitarian measures include the exchange of prisoners and of comprehensive lists of prisoners held; and allowing the free flow of commercial and relief goods.

14. The response of the two sides to these overtures was initially receptive but they have become markedly less interested as the fighting has escalated. So far, the one confidence-building measure on which both sides have been able to agree, in principle, is the release of prisoners-of-war. The Mission had

suggested to both sides a large enough exchange to show their genuine commitment and proposed the release of 200 prisoners-of-war by each side. Both sides agreed, but, at the time of writing, had not yet implemented this understanding.

15. The Mission has kept a rotational presence in Kabul since 10 April, when UNSMA military advisers returned to Kabul for the first time since late August 1998. UNSMA officers also joined United Nations inter-agency missions to other Afghan cities. The senior military adviser went, in mid-May, on the first United Nations mission to Mazar-e-Sharif since its withdrawal in August 1998.

16. The Mission has emphasized its close cooperation with the assistance community and has participated in meetings with organizers for the Afghanistan Support Group (ASG) meeting held in Stockholm on 21 and 22 June. UNSMA and the office of the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator produced a joint paper for the meeting, examining further the actual and potential scope for cooperation between the political and humanitarian efforts in promoting peace.

17. Members of the Mission participated in an assessment mission for the proposed Civil Affairs Unit within UNSMA. The mission visited Kandahar, Kabul and Dushanbe and met senior representatives of the Taliban and UF. The Mission explained to them the purpose of the proposed Civil Affairs Unit. Both sides gave their agreement and support for the proposal.

18. Following the recommendations of the assessment mission for the establishment of a Civil Affairs Unit as part of UNSMA, the United Nations will start recruitment of civil affairs officers for phased deployment both in the Taliban and non-Taliban areas, security conditions permitting. The initial objectives of the UNSMA civil affairs officers will be modest, in view of the complex and difficult situation on the ground. They will work closely with local Afghan authorities as well as with United Nations agencies and programmes, NGOs and other human rights organizations. Their primary objective should be to seek, through their presence and contacts with the local authorities, to promote respect for minimum humanitarian standards and deter massive and systematic violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the future. The Civil Affairs Unit will report to the Department of Political Affairs through the Mission on a regular basis.

IV. MY SPECIAL ENVOY AND ACTIVITIES AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

19. On 2[illegible] March, my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, completed his latest mission to Afghanistan and the region, the details of which were described in my previous report. Mr. Brahimi then came back to New York in early April for consultations with me and senior Secretariat officials, as well as with representatives of Member States concerned.

20. Mr. Brahimi visited Washington on 16 April for consultations with officials at the State Department. On 19 April, he briefed the Security Council on the outcome of his mission and the political and military situation on the ground. He expressed concern over the lack of progress for peace owing to the absence of political will on the part of the Afghan warring factions, which seemed to be

bent on fighting each other. He also expressed disappointment with the modest level of cooperation among countries concerned, in particular those of the "six plus two" group. My Special Envoy reminded the Council that Afghanistan was a landlocked country and that ammunition, weapons and other war matériel, which had so far enabled the Afghan factions to continue fighting, must either have come from or through those neighbouring countries.

21. Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, convened a meeting of the "six plus two" informal group, at the ambassadorial level, on 12 May, with a view to discussing the proposed high-level meeting in Tashkent. The group comprises all the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan - China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - as well as the Russian Federation and the United States of America. Explaining the developments in Afghanistan, including the collapse of the intra-Afghan dialogue in Ashkabad, Mr. Prendergast voiced disappointment at the lack of real progress towards peace and stressed the responsibility of the group to find a common approach for a settlement of the Afghan conflict.

22. In accordance with the agreement reached at the meeting, experts of the six plus two group met on 25 May to discuss the text of a draft statement for the proposed high-level meeting of the group in Tashkent. However, little progress was made owing to differences on various substantive points among the members.

V. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A. Humanitarian situation

23. The ongoing conflict continues to affect all aspects of civilian life in many parts of Afghanistan. Continued instability in parts of the central, northern and western regions augurs more civilian suffering and will create new humanitarian challenges. The food supply remains precarious in many parts of the country.

24. Regarding health needs, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with the Afghan health officials and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), carried out the first round of the National Immunization Days from 9 to 11 May, providing oral polio vaccine for over 3.6 million children under five. UNICEF and WHO continue to provide health education and medical supplies to health institutions in various parts of the country. WHO and UNICEF, in collaboration with local officials and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), are seeking to assist the population of Gulran district in Herat province where a mystery disease, which appeared in May, killed about 200 people.

25. Refugees continue to return. Two hundred-eighty Afghan refugee families returned with the assistance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from Hangu and Thall camp in Pakistan to Logar and Paktia provinces in Afghanistan. From Balochistan, 114 families returned in late May, mostly to Balkh and Jowzjan provinces. A total of 339 families returned from Pakistan via Afghanistan's southern region. Over 80 families and more than 2,500 individuals returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Nimroz

province. A planned voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Iran through Herat is expected to begin on 19 June. The World Food Programme (WFP) has allocated 6,500 tons of food aid as a repatriation package for up to 130,000 returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, who are anticipated to settle in four areas of Afghanistan.

26. Regarding narcotics, a strategic analysis of the expansion of opium cultivation in Afghanistan was conducted in three districts of Kunar, four districts of Laghman and one district of Logar provinces. The annual opium poppy survey of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme is under way, performed by 58 trained survey coordinators in southern and eastern regions in May. A survey in Badakhshan province is to follow in June. The overall survey will be completed in three months time and the final report issued by September 1999.

27. In the area of mine-clearance, the Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan within the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan has thus far cleared 13.9 million square meters of mined and battlefield areas and surveyed 12.4 million square meters of minefield areas. The total remaining mined area is estimated at 703 square kilometres, of which over 90 per cent is agricultural and grazing land. Since 1990, the Programme has destroyed nearly one million mines and unexploded ordnance in Afghanistan and briefed 4.7 million civilians on mine awareness.

28. In Kabul, an estimated quarter of the one million residents receive some form of international humanitarian assistance. Many families have sold their belongings to survive. However, life in Kabul has not come to a standstill following the partial withdrawal in July 1998 of support for humanitarian programmes (along with the bulk of the NGOs). Core emergency feeding programmes have continued despite some disruptions. There is no significant investment in rehabilitation of the infrastructure or commercial development and employment opportunities are few. Salaries for civil servants are either paid late or not at all.

29. The focus of emergency humanitarian assistance in the Kabul region this spring was on Wardak and Logar provinces, where thousands of rural families lost their homes in an earthquake in February 1999. A programme is under way for the rehabilitation of up to 8,000 destroyed homes, aimed at providing basic shelter before the winter. Kabul-based agencies are developing a regional disaster plan to meet future natural or man-made disasters. International help has been extended to the war-affected population of the Shomali valley, north of Kabul. Its extensive irrigation network is of potential importance for the area's food security. Efforts by United Nations agencies and others to transport vaccines and other essential supplies by land to the area continue to meet with unnecessary obstructions.

30. In central Afghanistan, continued fighting between Taliban and UF forces in the three districts of Bamyan, Shibar and Yakolang (estimated population 182,000) has resulted in some 20,000 people leaving Bamyan and Shibar and an unknown number fleeing Yakolang. Most of the displaced have sought sanctuary with the local population in neighbouring districts and around 100 to 150 people have been arriving daily as refugees in Quetta, Pakistan. In Hazarajat, food

production, food availability and transport accessibility are all at risk and transport costs have increased. The population has not yet recovered from the blockade of 1997-1998.

31. A food security coordination group, comprising NGOs and United Nations agencies, has launched an integrated response to the food shortages. This operation aims to assist 30,000 vulnerable households by the end of 1999, through food distribution and cash for work schemes. The World Food Programme will send 1,800 tons of food for over 70,000 people in the central highlands of Hazarajat, targeting the poorest, the landless, female-headed households and the displaced.

32. In northern Afghanistan, the first mission of United Nations international personnel, comprising the office of the United Nations Coordinator, WFP, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, UNICEF, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, FAO and UNSMA, visited the regional capital of Mazar-e-Sharif in May. United Nations activities will increase gradually over the forthcoming months. Negotiations are ongoing with the Uzbekistan authorities to permit the United Nations, and specifically WFP, to import wheat by barge across the Amu Darya (the frontier bridge has been closed since May 1997). The area is not easily reached from the south because of the closure of the Salang highway.

33. Fighting in the north in 1997 and 1998 exacerbated existing social and economic problems and accentuated rehabilitation needs. Urban population displacement has been considerable but many people have now returned, although they have lost most of their assets. Urban poverty is high as a result of the collapse in the casual wage-labour market and internal and external trade. People continue to sell off their household possessions. Education, especially female education, formerly at high levels in the region, has been curtailed by the Taliban, despite continued public demand.

B. Human rights

34. The new Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Mr. Kamal Hossain, visited Kabul in mid-March as well as Islamabad and Peshawar, Pakistan. He presented his report to the fifty-fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in April (E/CN.4/1999/40).

35. Mr. Hossain, both in his oral and written reports, drew attention to the devastating impact of the years of war on the human rights of the Afghan people. He noted that an unceasing flow of arms to all sides in the conflict has been "a critical factor which contributes to the persistence of human rights abuses by subjecting men, women and children to the arbitrary rule of those who use those arms and by making people virtual hostages in their own land". He also expressed concern about the deteriorating socio-economic status of many Afghans whose basic rights were being jeopardized in the face of growing impoverishment and marginalization. He expressed particular concern about the situation of women and children, who constitute the majority of those in need of humanitarian assistance.

36. With renewed outbreaks of fighting and intensification of the war in several parts of Afghanistan, civilians are being subjected to serious violations of their rights. In response to reports of summary executions of non-combatants, including women and children, in their homes, arbitrary detentions, forced displacement, use of forced labour and burning of homes and property in the central highlands of Hazarajat, the Special Rapporteur visited Quetta, Pakistan, on 22 May where he met refugees who provided credible eye-witness accounts of gross violations of human rights during March, April and May 1999. There have also been reports of human rights abuses by Hezb-e-Wahdat forces.

37. On 23 May, Mr. Hossain visited Kandahar where he met Taliban officials and discussed with them his concern about the situation in Hazarajat. He underlined the need for the Taliban to issue instructions to their military commanders to refrain from further violations, to release all civilians who had been detained arbitrarily, including those reportedly in forced labour camps, to investigate all alleged violations and to prosecute those guilty of such violations. He also requested access to Hazarajat to assess the human rights situation and to assist in remedying the situation.

38. The authorities in Kandahar indicated that, given the security situation, it would be unsafe for the Special Rapporteur to visit Hazarajat and promised to undertake their own investigation and advise him of the outcome. Although the Taliban authorities later commented on recent events in Hazarajat, they have not provided the information requested on the alleged human rights violations. Neither does it appear that any remedial action has been taken. The Special Rapporteur has again indicated his interest in visiting Afghanistan to undertake a more thorough investigation with a view to determining the facts and reviewing his findings with the relevant authorities so that appropriate action can be taken.

39. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is now in the process of fielding a team tasked with investigating alleged massacres and other gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in northern and central Afghanistan in 1997 and 1998. A Chief Investigator has been appointed and investigating work has begun. After the completion of its field work, the team will report its findings to the High Commissioner.

VI. OBSERVATIONS

40. It is most disappointing to observe the annual rite of intensified fighting in Afghanistan in the spring and summer months repeating itself once again. Hopes for peace, which were raised by direct talks between the belligerents during winter, have again proven to be illusory.

41. I remain convinced that, to break this futile annual cycle of false expectations and depressing recurrence of violence, the Afghan factions, and also those countries supporting them, must finally recognize that the conflict cannot be resolved through warfare and that a negotiated settlement represents the only viable path to lasting peace. The constant shifting of the front lines

underlines the futility of war as well as the need for sustained dialogue towards a peaceful settlement.

42. The chronic fighting and the resultant political uncertainty has exacerbated the human misery of innocent Afghan people, who have already suffered for too long and are the real victims of this endless war. Therefore, I welcome the support given by the two Afghan sides to the proposed Civil Affairs Unit of UNSMA. I am profoundly disturbed at the credible reports emanating from the central region of Afghanistan of human rights violations.

43. Once again, I strongly urge the two warring sides to resume the direct talks unconditionally and without delay. I also renew my appeal to countries concerned, in particular members of the "six plus two" informal group, to achieve closer coordination among themselves and reinvigorate their efforts to find a common approach towards a settlement of the Afghan conflict. The United Nations stands ready to assist in this regard.

44. Meanwhile, I will continue to utilize all the diplomatic means available to persuade the two sides to resume discussions and agree to halt their offensive operations and to encourage and support Afghans, of whatever political persuasion, to work together more actively to achieve national reconciliation. In this regard, I note with interest the initiative taken by the former King to prepare for a Loya Jirgah and hope that it will contribute to the creation of a solid basis for a wider political consensus.

45. I am pleased to note that the return of United Nations international staff to Afghanistan has progressed well and without major mishap. Continued efforts need to be made to ensure that international staffing levels are sufficient to support vital humanitarian and other activities.